

City Plans Free Internet Access

Wireless Network Would Be Created

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Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez wants to see more city residents online.

Whether residents of the nation's second-poorest city can afford an Internet connection should be irrelevant, he says.

Because the city is hoping to provide it for free.

Hartford purchasing agents published a formal request Monday for contractors who could create a wireless network citywide. The network, which would allow all residents free, high-speed access to the Web, could be up and running on a test basis as early as next summer.

The official "Request for Qualifications" asks for more than just a vendor capable of setting up such a network. The city also wants the eventual vendor to offer computer training and hardware, such as laptops, at a discount to city residents.

"It's not just about providing a service that is nice and that people enjoy," said Matt Hennessy, Perez's chief of staff. "This is about getting Hartford residents trained and equipped online."

"Everything from service-sector jobs to opening bank accounts to registering for classes, all these things have become paperless," he said. "Hartford residents, the majority of whom don't have Internet connections and don't have immediate access in their household to a computer, are at a distinct disadvantage."

The mayor's office estimates that fewer than 33 percent of the city's families have access to a computer or the Internet in their homes. It's a scenario that creates a so-called "digital divide," a chasm of opportunity between families that do have easy access to the technology, and those that don't.

"Many of [Hartford's] citizens are computer illiterate, greatly diminishing their employability," reads the city's published vendor request. "Children are at a significant technological disadvantage when compared to those living in the affluent suburbs surrounding Hartford."

The technology the city is seeking, known as Wi-Fi, or "wireless fidelity," allows a person to access the Internet using a computer equipped with a wireless card. Anyone with a wireless-enabled laptop can use the Internet without providing any personal information or paying fees for access.

Cities from Philadelphia to Atlanta to Corpus Christi, Texas, have embarked on similar measures to offer free Wi-Fi access. Hennessy said Hartford composed its official request by piecing together relevant components of requests by other cities.

Hartford is looking to roll out its Wi-Fi service in two geographically diverse neighborhoods - downtown and Blue Hills - before eventually expanding the network throughout the city by 2009. The prototype neighborhoods should be wired by mid-2006, Hennessy said.

Hennessy said the service should be a boon to downtown merchants, offices and Hartford's overall perception as a hip to place to hang out.

"You build an environment where folks can conduct business seamlessly from their office to sitting out in Bushnell Park," Hennessy said.

The cost of setting up such a system is not yet clear, but Hennessy said the city minimizes its cost because the "fiber optic backbone" required to bolster a citywide Wi-Fi system already exists in Hartford, girding city government's computer network.

Also, city officials are expecting that private vendors responding to the city request would be willing to share in the costs of setting up and maintaining the network.

One drawback to cities that have embarked on offering free Wi-Fi: They tend to run afoul of private wireless vendors that have accused the municipalities of poaching their business.

Locally, when the town of Manchester sought to offer free Wi-Fi in its downtown, SBC Connecticut protested, saying the town was acting as a telecommunications company. The state Department of Public Utility Control ruled in favor of Manchester last year and allowed the Wi-Fi access to continue.

Would-be vendors have until Jan. 10 to respond to the city's published request, which can be viewed at www.RFPdepot.com

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